

Through the Noise to the Sea by sardonicsmiley and sherriaisling

Posted: No More Tears

Canon: Stargate Atlantis

Pairing: John Sheppard/Rodney McKay

Rating: Mature [R]

Word Count: 18,000+

Summary: John has time to realize that those fingers are webbed and then the involuntary laughter about finding a mermaid interferes with his already questionable grip on breathing, and he passes out.

Chapter 1.

Atlantis is the most beautiful place John has ever been, though most of that has to do with the never-ending ocean surrounding the city. He hasn't really had the chance to explore the rest of the city, past the room he snagged as his quarters and the 'gate room, but the balconies are great, all shiny metal with an open view of the unfamiliar stars and the constant motion of the waves.

Not five hours ago, John had thought he was going to die, eaten by an alien in the middle of a strange galaxy. But he, and most of his men, had survived that, just like they'd survived the city rising. John braces his hands on the railing, breathing in the salt air, letting his head hang down, trying to stretch out the tension in the back of his neck.

They'd lived, and for now he just wants to bask in that, but he can already feel the worries creeping back in. They're cut off from Earth. They have a race of alien vampires after them. Hell, they have an alien people living in their dilapidated city. John winces at the stab of pain through his temples, rocking his weight against the railing, wondering how this all ended up in his lap. He's not this guy. He was never supposed to be this guy.

Behind him, the party is still going on, people laughing and letting off some of the tension of the last few days. John considers going back in, because he figures he probably should put in another appearance before going to get some much needed sleep.

John pushes back on the railing, sighing, and that's when the ancient metal work apparently decides it has had enough, and dumps John down into the churning water below.

Hitting the water feels like hitting a brick wall, knocks the air right out of John's lungs, slams his teeth together on his tongue, and leaves his skin stinging. For a moment he kicks his legs out

indiscriminately, coughing on water, a wave hitting him in the side of the head, forcing sharp salt spray up his nose and into his mouth.

John tries to spit the water out, shaking his head, trying to keep himself above the waves. He's wearing his jacket, and his boots, and in the icy cold water his limbs are already going leaden. Another wave breaks over him. When John kicks and gropes for the surface, he can't find it.

The salt water burns John's eyes, and he kicks again, knowing that the surface has to be right above him somewhere. There's a rush of colder water, and something moves against John's thigh, a brush of pressure that makes him shout. The bubbles float up the way John had thought was down, which is in no way a good thing.

His lungs are burning in earnest now, pressure squeezing at his chest as his legs and arms get heavier. After surviving attacks from evil aliens, after finally making it this far, he doesn't want to drown. It's not fair, and he tries to kick harder, aware that his body is moving the wrong way despite his best attempts to prevent that from happening.

He can't hold his breath anymore, and it escapes in a rush of bubbles, as he tries to stop himself from sucking water back in, not managing it. The water burns in his sinuses, sets his lungs on fire, and John coughs, getting lost in the pressure inside his head and chest, water burning like fire, even as his limbs go numb.

And then something is closing over his nose. John tries to bat it away, but there's a hand around the back of his head, holding him in place, and a mouth against his. John snaps his eyes open, not even realizing he'd closed them, as air is pushed down his throat. It's too dark to see anything beneath the waves, but John can feel a strong body pressed against his. He wraps his arms around the broad shoulders of the man who somehow found him, holding on desperately.

He coughs, water getting in the way of the air, and the man swallows the water, pushing more air into John's lungs to replace it. It doesn't make any sense, John doesn't even know how that's possible. He doesn't care. There is air and he's not drowning, and John slides one hand up, around the back of the man's head, holding him as close as he can.

The other man removes his own hands, and John holds onto him tighter, feeling the muscles in the man's chest and shoulders move. The air keeps coming, and John feels himself start shivering, pressing his mouth closer to the other man's, afraid of losing his air supply.

And then they break the surface of the water, cold, windy air blowing against John's head and neck. He tilts his face up towards the sky, still holding onto the other man's neck, coughing so violently that it makes his whole body hurt. John is only vaguely aware that they're moving, the waves occasionally breaking over his head. The other man keeps him from sinking again.

John can't seem to stop coughing, hearing wet clicks in his lungs, swallowing more water. When they run into something solid, he startles, trying to get his feet to work on the steps that he's being dragged up and not quite managing it. The man says something that John can't make sense of, smoothing a hand down John's back, dragging him the rest of the way out of the water and then laying him down flat on the ground.

John curls up onto his side immediately, flattening one hand on the ground, body wracked with painful coughs. The other man is petting at John's hair and shoulders, cooing, making these little clicking sounds that make no sense but at the same time are washing over John like pure comfort.

It hurts to get his eyes open, but John manages, still coughing, dizzy. The man that saved him is leaning over him, naked under the silver moonlight, hair plastered to his head, eyes huge and bright. The man makes another low, sweet sound, stroking his fingers across John's cheek, and John has time to realize that those fingers are webbed and then the involuntary laughter about finding a mermaid interferes with his already questionable grip on breathing, and he passes out.

When John wakes up, he has no idea where he is. He's in a little white bed, tucked in, listening to a bunch of yelling people and some crashes. John blinks, rubbing his head, his hair is damp, and it's the scrubs that finally clue him in as to where he is.

The infirmary is big, spacious, and his little area is curtained off from whatever noisy situation is going on outside. John coughs into his hand, memory coming back as he slides out of the bed, still tasting the salty water in the corners of his mouth, wondering where the merman went.

John pushes the curtain out of the way, following the shouts across the infirmary to one of the little private rooms, nodding at the nurse standing awkwardly outside the door and waving it open.

John doesn't know what he was expecting when he opened the door. It wasn't what he finds. John's merman is strapped to the wall by one wrist, crouching down, looking scared out of his mind. The spines that are raised all over his body are new, as is the constant, loud, stream of panicked whistles and clicks that John can't make any sense of.

There are a bunch of soldiers standing around the edges of the room, P-90s up, casting nervous looks at the merman kneeling by the wall. Carson is approaching John's merman slowly, holding a gigantic needle in one hand, the other extended in a way that John is sure is supposed to be comforting. Carson is trying to talk over the merman's constant panicked litany, but he's not managing it, and a few of the soldiers are yelling for everyone to shut up.

When John steps into the room, the merman's gaze darts towards him. The man jerks towards John, recoiling when the cuff on his wrist catches. The whistles and clicks take on a different quality, almost desperate, the merman's gaze fixed and pleading on John.

And, really, there's nothing that John can do at that point but go to him. Carson shouts, trying to catch John's shoulder. John ignores him, sidestepping on his way to the merman. The spines raised across his skin look sharp, tinted blue, and John kneels in front of him.

Carson, from behind John, sounds tense when he says, "Major, I'm not sure you should be—"

John raises one hand, saying, "Sh," and reaches out slowly to the merman's bound wrist. John is inches away when the spines all slide back into the man's body, and his words change, tone and sound, everything, though it still makes no sense to John.

Still, the guy looks scared witless, so John says, "It's okay, buddy, you're fine now," reaching out to the closest soldier without looking away from the merman to order, "Keys," and, after a moment's hesitation, he's given them.

The merman pulls his arms up to his chest as soon as his wrist is released, still kneeling, still babbling. Carson steps up and the merman's blue eyes go huge, his voice taking on an angry tone, the spines sliding out again.

John says, waving Carson back, "You might want to stay back. I don't think you made a very good first impression."

Carson makes a huffing sound, "Major, I don't know what you think you're doing, but this...man...was found kneeling over you out on one of the lower docks and—"

"And he saved my life." John rocks back on his heels, rising to his feet and turning to face Carson, raising his eyebrows. "I was, uh, exploring one of the new areas of the city and some of the floor must have been rotted through. I almost drowned."

For a moment Carson just blinks at him, mouth opening and closing. There's movement behind John, and he looks over his shoulder to find the merman standing, arms crossed. The man steps towards John, spines sliding back into his skin when he gets closer, until he's right at John's back, reaching one hand out to grab John's scrubs, holding on.

Carson finally manages, sounding less sure of himself, "We don't know what he is, I need to do an examination and—"

John frowns, doing his best to ignore the continued, constant, stream of speech from the merman who is apparently hiding behind him. He cuts Carson off with, "He's an alien."

Obviously." And when Carson starts to look hopeful, "But so are the Athosians, and I don't seem to remember us chaining them to the wall without making sure they were okay with that."

Carson sighs, with a impatient roll of his eyes and a half-step forward, aborted when the merman breaks off speaking long enough to hiss angrily, "Well, they're hardly the same thing, lad."

John turns to look over his shoulder. The merman has some bruising along his shoulders where John had held on too tightly, his gaze darting nervously around the room, his mouth moving constantly. John crosses his arms and says flatly, "I'm not seeing a difference."

"Well, that's all fine and good, but you're not the medical officer of this expedition, are you?" Carson is still waving that big needle around, and every time he speaks the merman starts hissing. It would be amusing, except for the way the merman still looks terrified.

John wishes, standing off against Carson, that he had some pants. But he doesn't, and there's nothing he can do about that, so he just braces his hands on his hips and scowls, "But I am the military leader, and I've decided he's not a threat."

For a moment he and Carson just glare at each other, the soldiers standing around the room looking increasingly uncomfortable. And then Carson huffs, lips thinning out when he says, "Perhaps we should get Elizabeth down here, then?"

And there's no way John can say no to that, so instead he says, "Why don't we do that?"

By the time Elizabeth arrives, barely any time at all, John has managed to get his merman calmed down a little bit. The man still won't stop talking, no matter how many times John tries to explain that they can't understand him. By the time Elizabeth walks into the room, wearing her uniform with her hair messy, John has started just nodding his head, because it seems to comfort the merman.

And then Elizabeth walks in, cocks her head to the side, and says something in the same language the merman is speaking in. Or, well, John assumes as much anyway, since the man snaps his head up to look at her, relief drenching his expression as he starts talking even faster.

The conversation shoots back and forth between Elizabeth and the merman, everyone else watching. The man starts gesturing, webbed fingers tracing patterns through the air and Elizabeth looks gleeful. John finally clears his throat, raising a hand and interrupting with, "Care to share with the rest of the class?"

Elizabeth blinks, says something quickly to the merman, motioning to the other people gathered around them. The man rolls his eyes, waves a hand dismissively, but falls silent for the first time since John walked into the room.

Elizabeth says, not taking her gaze off the merman, "Well, first of all, he's speaking Ancient. It's a slightly different dialect than I'm used to—or that might just be an accent. He wants to know if you're alright, John." Elizabeth smiles gently, looking very amused.

John can feel himself flush, clearing his throat, "I'm fine."

That gets another smile out of Elizabeth, and she and the merman have a brief conversation about that. John clears his throat, and Elizabeth blinks, picks up her explanation again, "Apparently, his people have been on this planet for as long as the city has been. Most of them think it's cursed but he—" she pauses, waving a hand, "—well, the closest I can translate is that he thinks they're all complete idiots. Very vehemently. You too, Carson. And you and I are going to have to talk about protocol for the treatment of our guests."

John tries to resist smirking at the look Elizabeth shoots Carson, but not very hard. He knows Carson had only been trying to do his job, but walking in and finding the man that had saved his life chained to the wall hadn't been something that endeared the doctor to John.

After a moment the merman starts talking again, tone pissed off. That gets another long conversation started between he and Elizabeth and this time John just sighs, bracing his forehead on his hand and listening to the foreign language washing over him.

And then there's a soft brush of cool skin against John's cheek. He looks up to find the merman watching him, mouth turned down in the corner. Elizabeth says, softly, "He wants to know if you're still having trouble breathing."

John nods, not turning to look at her, "I'm fine, really," and the man smiles even before Elizabeth translates, expression lightening.

For a stretch no one says anything, and then the merman rattles something else off, Elizabeth answering him and then saying for the rest of them, "Well, he and I need to talk some more in the morning, but he is definitely sentient, and claims to know the city top to bottom. He's agreed to stay for a few days. And, John?" John blinks up at her, she looks like she's trying not to laugh, "He wants to stay with you."

"Well, that's probably for the best. I'll keep an eye on him," John nods his head towards the door, pulling the other man along. Carson is still protesting when John leads the merman out of the private room, snagging some spare pants from the piled up supplies and handing a pair over.

The merman takes the pants with a frown, then rolls his eyes and pulls them on. John does not stare at the man's hairless legs, the way his skin tints to light blue towards the insides of his thighs, or the webbed toes. His fingers don't fumble with pulling on his own pants.

The merman cocks his head to the side, whistling something long and sweet, clicking during the sound. John runs a hand back through his hair and says, "Yeah, exactly," before reaching out to grab the man's wrist again, pulling him out of the infirmary.

The skin beneath his hand is smooth and noticeably cool, obviously not human. John makes himself let go, because it's kind of weird, and the man follows him anyway, down the hall to the stairs, across to John's quarters.

There's none of the awe and surprise that everyone else is wearing in the merman's expression. His bearing as much as says that he's seen this all before, and somehow that calms John deep in his chest. If someone, even someone decidedly alien, doesn't think this is completely weird, then maybe John can manage to not be freaked out.

There really aren't very many hours left in the night by the time John waves the door to his quarters open, but he's tired, and the merman looks like he might be too. Not that John has any idea how he's supposed to tell. In any case, John motions around the room, feeling awkward when he says, "Make yourself at home," and the man just cocks his head to the side, humming and watching John.

John sits down heavily on his narrow bed, patting the mattress beside his hip, and after staring at John suspiciously for a moment, the other man joins him. Then he clicks something that sounds irritated, tugging the scrubs over his head and leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees, whistling low and soft.

John stares.

The gills he had missed, somehow, in the midst of arguing with Carson. The skin on the merman's back is bluer than the rest of his body, gills laid where John thinks there should only be ribs, rising and falling softly with each breath. Contrary to the blue of the man's skin, each breath reveals red, oxygen rich flesh beneath.

John catches himself a half second before he lowers hand to skin, jerking his hand back and shaking himself. He's tired, obviously, forgetting that he has no more right than Carson to get grabby with the alien. John clears his throat, which gets the other man's attention, blue eyes focusing on John with startling intensity, and then feels compelled to speak, "Look, I know you don't really understand—" and he cuts himself off, feeling stupid. "I really should have brought Elizabeth along, huh? Do you, I mean, are you tired?" He mimes resting his head on his hands, closes his eyes and making a soft snoring sound.

When John opens his eyes, the man is grinning at him, and when John's skin starts staining to red the man laughs, sweet and burbling. John is just staring at him, captivated, when the man starts the whistles and clicks again, one side of his mouth still crooked up as he reaches out to cover John's mouth with his hand, shaking his head back and forth and making a sound that John decides is definitely a 'tsk'.

The skin of the man's fingers is a little rough, the membrane between them smooth, and John shivers a little when the touch is withdrawn, smiling ruefully and saying, "My wife always complained about me snoring too, you know."

The man stands then, grabbing one of John's legs and pulling it into the bed, making a loud snapping sound in the back of his throat. John raises his eyebrows, sliding his other leg onto the mattress and pointing at the man, "Are you this pushy all the time?"

For a moment the man stares at John's hand, and then his expression brightens, and he points at himself as well, speaking slower than he had been. At first John doesn't realize that he's repeating the same sounds. The man makes the snapping sound again, then repeats himself, expression tinting with impatience.

And it has to be his name. John can feel himself grinning, taking a deep breath and trying to repeat the humming M sound at the beginning, the harder consonants at the end. The man makes a face when John closes his mouth, shaking his head and repeating himself even slower.

It takes John more tries than he likes to think about to get a pronunciation that pleases the other man, but it's worth it for the way the man smiles, humming, when John finally manages, "Meredydd?"

For a while they just grin at each other, and then Meredydd makes the snapping sound again, and points at John with an expectant lean of his head. John mirrors the gesture, and says his name, as slowly as he can. The other man echoes him, the 'J' drawn out almost to a trill, the rest of the sounds following the lilt.

It's the first time John has ever thought of his name as sounding particularly musical. And he hears himself saying, "Yeah, exactly," and flashing a thumbs up which Meredydd just stares at blankly for a moment before looking at John expectantly. When John smiles instead, the man smiles back, saying John's name again before bracing a hand on John's chest and pushing him down flat on the mattress.

John starts to protest, but Meredydd is already pulling his blankets up, tucking John in, babbling the entire time, and John just kind of goes with it. He's feeling bemused and tired, and Meredydd brushes a hand back over John's hair, frowning for a moment, touching the tip of one finger to John's bottom lip and saying something soft and low.

John says, reaching up to touch the man's wrist, "Yeah, buddy, good thing you were there, huh?"

Meredydd hums, then reaches up and closes John's eyelids. John snorts with amusement, batting the man's hands away and rolling onto his side. Meredydd pats him on the shoulder, and John falls asleep without really meaning to.

John wakes up with a nightmare about water filling him up still in the front of his mind. He's thrashing in his blankets, covered in a cold sweat, and for a moment he just lays there, getting his breathing back under control, waiting for his heart to slow down.

The sun is bright outside his windows, and for a half-second John thinks that yesterday was just a dream. And then he coughs, his chest sore and aching. He doubts, somehow, that's from his dream. John pushes himself up onto his elbows, saying, "Hey, are you—" and cuts himself off when he realizes that there's no one else in the room with him.

John is out of bed in seconds, grabbing for his radio and wondering where the hell the Meredydd could have gone. The other man's shirt is still beside John's bed, but that doesn't mean anything, and John has a sudden sick weight in his stomach, wondering if Carson was right all along, if the other man had been a threat to the city, if he's screwed up again.

John is almost out the door when he notices the infirmary pants last seen on Meredydd in an abandoned pile beside his bathroom door. John makes himself take a deep breath, heart still pounding as he makes his way across the room, bending to pick up the pants before stepping into the bathroom.

The bathroom is fairly good size, they all are, complete with a shower and a tub big enough to house a small orgy. It's the tub that gets John's attention, filled to the edge with water. John sits on the side, looking down into the water, feeling himself smiling like an idiot.

Meredydd is curled up into a ball, head pillowed on his arms, expression lax and open with sleep. He's naked under the water, and John looks, trying to figure out where exactly the lines dividing his pale skin to blue are. His gills open and close, flashing red, looking delicate and alien and like the coolest thing John has ever seen.

John dips the tips of his fingers into the water without thinking, and a second later Meredydd's eyes snap open, gaze jerking towards the movement immediately. John thinks it must have been the vibrations in the water, but stops caring when Meredydd grins at him, sitting up abruptly in the tub, water streaming down his neck and shoulders.

Meredydd says, shaking his head and splattering John with drops of water, "John," in that lilting way of his that John doesn't want to correct.

John smiles back, says, "Good morning," and when Meredydd cocks his head to the side, snapping in the back of his throat, John repeats it. Meredydd makes an impatient sound the second time John repeats it, reaching out and pressing his fingers against the side of John's throat, snapping again.

This time, when John speaks, Meredydd makes a happy humming sound, and repeats with almost perfect inflection, "Good morning, John."

And his smile, big and pleased, has John grinning helplessly back. For a moment they just stay like that, and then Meredydd reaches out, poking John in the stomach and going off in his own language, and John shakes his head, standing and offering Meredydd a hand out of the tub when he says, "Okay, fine, I'm hungry too."

John knows that he should probably take Meredydd to talk to Elizabeth. But she hadn't specifically told him he had to, and John makes sure he forgets to turn his radio on, leading the other man around the city, enjoying himself immensely.

He managed to get Meredydd into a shirt and pants before they left his room, but the other man had wanted nothing to do with shoes, and John hadn't felt like pushing the issue. They get looks in the mess hall, the cooks staring at Meredydd's webbed fingers with faintly disbelieving looks until they catch John's glare.

Meredydd forces John to tell him the name for every food that's being offered, while John waves the other people in line past them. By the time they finally make it to a table, which Meredydd also demands a name for, John's stomach is rumbling pretty much continually.

Meredydd keeps demanding names for things during the meal, eating quick and just a little messy, forced to hold his fork with his fingertips. The coffee seems to be a big hit, Meredydd's eyes going wide from the first drink, his whistles sounding completely thrilled when he swallows. John doesn't even mind when the other man steals his cup.

They've got a bit of an audience by the time they leave, scientists and soldiers alike staring, and John just raises his eyebrows and stares until they all avert their eyes. Meredydd appears not to notice the curious looks he's drawing, reaching out to touch John's wrist and tilting his head to the side with an impatient click.

John shrugs, pausing outside the mess hall and looking up and down the hall before pointing out, "Shouldn't you be the one giving me the grand tour?"

And somehow it's not actually a surprise when Meredydd touches John's wrist again, and proceeds to do just that, dragging John around the city, showing him the transporters and how they work, demanding names for things as they go, smacking John's hand when he tries to touch one of the Ancient machines and rolling his eyes at John's exaggerated pout.

By the time they make it to the 'gate room, John can't really keep the smile off his face. Meredydd makes his snapping sound, pointing at the 'gate expectantly and John pulls him up to it, puts the other man's hand on the cool surface before giving it a name.

John wishes he could explain what it did, but some of his excitement must be contagious, because Meredydd traces the 'gate symbol beside his hand, humming contentedly in the back of his throat. John is just considering taking Meredydd out onto one of the balconies to try to explain that they go out to the stars, when Elizabeth says, sounding amused, "Keeping our guest entertained, Major?"

John turns to find her smiling at them from the top step of the command level. Meredydd grabs him, dragging John along, already speaking to Elizabeth, words tumbling out fast and excited. John listens to them talk, Meredydd gesturing as he speaks, Elizabeth fumbling for a word every now and again, everyone in the command room staring at them with open mouths.

John clears his throat when it becomes apparent that Meredydd and Elizabeth have completely zoned out, keeping his voice low when he suggests, "Maybe we should take this to your office?"

Elizabeth blinks, then smiles wryly, nodding and saying something to Meredydd, leading the way to her office. Once they're inside, Meredydd and Elizabeth are off again, but for now John is content to sit in the chair and listen to them talk to each other.

He's not really paying attention, mind drifting to the Jumpers and a potential dogfight with the Darts, when he hears his name in the middle of Meredydd's words. He looks up, wondering why they're talking about him, and finds Elizabeth smiling at him again. She says, at his expectant look, "Looks like you've made a friend." And then her expression goes serious, "He wants to stay here, very much, in fact. What's the military's stand on that?"

John shifts in his seat, and tries to match her serious expression, though at the moment he's almost giddy at the thought that they have an alien that wants to live with them. He knows, logically, that the Athosians are aliens too. But Meredydd actually looks it.

After clearing his throat, John manages, "Well, there are others like him, right? I think we should be neighborly, let him stick around and check us out."

Elizabeth looks like she's trying not to smile when she says, "And if he stays, you do realize that he's not just to be a toy, Major?"

John is just opening his mouth to defend himself when the door to Elizabeth's office swings open. John recognizes the man that storms in, though he doesn't know the scientist well enough to put a name with his face. Glasses, ponytail, very worried expression, with a tablet held in his arms.

Elizabeth says, "Kavanagh, what can I do for—" and then the man is making an impatient sound, and slamming the tablet down on Elizabeth's desk. John watches Meredydd jump out of the corner of his eye, expression going tense and irritated, the line of spines up the bridge of his nose and the center of his forehead half-extending before retracting again.

Kavanagh is saying, "We have a serious problem. The ventilation systems in a lot of the labs aren't working, we've already had people reporting to the infirmary with headaches and if a dangerous gas escapes in there then we could have a very—" and that's when John tunes out.

Kavanagh is gesturing, Elizabeth is trying to calm him down, and Meredydd is standing and moving towards the desk. When Meredydd grabs the tablet, frowning as he looks down at the screen, Kavanagh tries to snatch it back and Meredydd hisses at him, spines sliding out.

John watches Kavanagh draw up short, his eyes going huge behind his glasses, while Elizabeth asks Meredydd something. The man sounds distracted when he answers, hands moving over the screen, Kavanagh going shrill when he demands, "What the hell is that thing doing?"

And John figures that since Meredydd can't understand that to know that he should be offended, someone should be in his place. John snaps, "That man has a name." Kavanagh turns towards him, face red with anger, mouth opening.

Elizabeth talks over them, voice quiet but intense, "Oh."

Meredydd shoots something back, putting the tablet back on the desk and crossing his arms, spines sliding back beneath his skin. Kavanagh grabs his tablet, expression tight as his fingers dance over the screen, Meredydd pointing at him and saying something that sounds nasty.

When Kavanagh looks up, he seems confused, "What did it do?"

John opens his mouth, scowling, and Elizabeth holds up a hand. She sounds calm, something John isn't sure he could have managed, when she says, "He rerouted power from some damaged feeds and changed airflow around a corroded joint."

For a moment no one speaks, Meredydd standing off to the side still looking irritated, spitting out more words in the same sour tone he'd been using. Whatever it is makes the tips of Elizabeth's ears stain red, and she coughs into her hand before saying something back that makes Meredydd wave a dismissive hand.

John says, carefully, "Someone want to loop the rest of us in?"

And Elizabeth says, sitting down slowly behind her desk, "He just made a very good argument for staying in the city for a while." And then she raises her hand, turning her radio on and continuing, "Doctor Zelenka? Could you please report to my office?"

By the time they get back to John's room that night, his head is buzzing with all the different languages he's been listening to. The giant three-way discussion between Elizabeth, Zelenka, and Meredydd had been enough to make John's eyes glaze over, and that was before Zelenka had started babbling excitedly in Czech.

Apparently, Meredydd hadn't been lying about being familiar with the city. He knows the Ancient tech well, even if he hadn't been able to use all of it before they arrived. And Zelenka insists that the other man is smart, frighteningly intelligent, and that he should be kept in the labs to work on their problems for the discernable future.

Meredydd snags one of the tablets when they're finally dismissed. He's still typing on it when John tiredly crawls into bed, letting his head hit the pillow and wondering if he's ever not going to feel completely exhausted again.

John is almost asleep when he feels Meredydd brush his hair back, the other man's voice soft when he says, "Good morning, John."

And John forces himself to wake up enough to correct it to 'good night', Meredydd grinning down at him when he closes his eyes again. John dreams about drowning, but this time there is someone there with him, dragging him back to the surface.

John finds Meredydd in his bathtub again the next morning, and that's the only moment alone he has with the other man the rest of the day. The scientists show up to collect Meredydd almost immediately, hustling him down to the labs.

When John swings by to check on him, after handling the duties that he's still not exactly sure how to perform, he finds Meredydd surrounded by a cluster of scientists and whiteboards, making the snapping sound and speaking in a tone that can only be described as scornful. He has a marker, scrawling out equations, the numbers shaped slightly differently than John is used to, using his other hand to wipe out someone else's work, snapping and glowering.

John has only been standing in the doorway for a moment when Meredydd twists to look at him, some of the irritation draining out of his expression. He says, "John!" happy and lilting, and

then goes off on a tangent, pointing impatiently at two of the other scientists, throwing his hands up, and making a stabbing motion with his marker.

John grins, walking over and gently directing the two marked scientists to the side, Meredydd humming and then saying, "Thank you," which is something John didn't teach him. John must look surprised, because Meredydd points at Zelenka, rattling off an explanation John doesn't understand.

Zelenka shrugs, "I try to teach him manners. Already, he makes Kusanagi and Smith cry, and they do not even know what he says." John can't help but noticing that the smaller man seems amused by the entire thing, trying to stop Meredydd from erasing more of the equations, arguing with him in Czech, Meredydd circling a huge portion of the numbers, sounding pissy.

One of the other scientists tries to touch the board in the corner and Meredydd hisses loudly, before shouting, "No, no, no! Bad!"

John just shakes his head, and flees the labs before he bursts into helpless laughter.

When John goes to see Elizabeth, Kavanagh is just leaving her office, looking like someone just told him his dog died. John raises his eyebrows, tilting his head towards the other man and she sighs, motioning for him to sit down when she says, "He refuses to work in a lab with Meredith."

For a moment John just stares, not understanding, and then he blinks, "Did you mean Meredydd?"

Elizabeth tilts her head to the side, she sounds faintly puzzled when she says, "How did you say that?" John repeats it, but she only shakes her head, "Well, at least there's one person in the city that can pronounce it to his satisfaction. I'm afraid he's just going to have to get used to the rest of us butchering it."

The conversation is making John a little uncomfortable, he changes the subject, "So, Kavanagh?"

Elizabeth sighs, nodding, rubbing at her temple with one hand, "Yes. Apparently they don't...get along." She makes a face, "He says he won't work with Mere—with our new friend, and Zelenka says they're getting so much done. So I had to demote Kavanagh."

John raises his eyebrows, and after a moment Elizabeth goes on, "I've promoted Zelenka. He didn't want the position, but, well...we're all making due, aren't we?" Her smile looks just a little brittle, and John tries to mirror the expression. They've all been thrown into a position they didn't quite expect. They're all having to adapt and adjust.

After a moment Elizabeth straightens, "Oh, I didn't even ask, what was it you needed, Major?"

John coughs. Now that he's here he's not sure that he wants to go through with it. But then his mouth is moving without him, "So, is there Ancient for Beginners around here somewhere?" And he tries to ignore the way Elizabeth grins at him.

A week later, sprawled on his bed, wracking his brain for human names, John realizes this is not exactly how he'd planned to spend his evening. But Meredydd had been highly irate when he came back from the labs, snapping at John and pointing at himself with a dark expression. John had leaned away from his laptop, raising his eyebrows and asking, "Meredydd?"

That had gotten him a smile, bright and brief, before Meredydd's expression went furious, and John doesn't know who taught him 'idiot', 'moron', or 'imbecile', but Meredydd had been putting them to good use. Then he'd huffed, motioned to John and hummed his name properly before sneering and rattling off something incomprehensible and finishing with a spat, "Not Meredith."

John had sighed, because he could understand the other man's frustration, and pointed out, "Maybe you should give them more than a week to get it right?"

Meredydd had just rolled his eyes, gesturing at John again and babbling. John had grinned, just a little, when he said, "Yeah, but I'm special." Which had only earned him an aggravated huff, and Meredydd flopping down onto his stomach across the foot of John's bed, expression sour.

After a moment, the man had pulled off his shirt, some of the strain leaving his expression with his gills no longer restricted. Eventually, once John had went back to his laptop, Meredydd had propped himself up on his elbows, and cocked his head to the side, rattling something off, finishing with, "John, Radek, Elizabeth, Aiden?" pointing at himself with his eyebrows raised.

John had made a face, shaking his head, assuring the other man that, "None of those are you, buddy." And then he'd felt compelled to give Meredydd some more options.

That had been what feels like hours ago. John is running out of names, and his throat hurts. But Meredydd has met every suggestion thus far with either a skeptical look or a sneer if he finds it especially offensive. John had thought they had it a few times, when he'd started going through football players and hit on Emmett, Patrick, or David, all of which Meredydd had considered for a moment before dismissing them.

John rubs at his eyes, trying to think of names that he hasn't already been through. Meredydd reaches out and pokes him impatiently in the arm and John half-heartedly bats him away, grumbling, "I'm thinking here, okay?" Meredydd's reply is sharp and dry, and John rolls his eyes, "I am not."

That doesn't buy him very much time. Meredydd pokes him again, and John thinks that's probably a behavior he should discourage, but he can't really bring himself to do anything about it. John cracks an eye open, sighing, sure that his next suggestion will be summarily dismissed as well, "Rodney?"

He's surprised when Meredydd makes a pleased humming sound, before snapping. John pushes up onto his elbows, blinking across at the other man and repeating the name. When Meredydd reaches out, resting his fingertips against John's throat, John doesn't have to be asked to repeat it once more.

Meredydd is frowning, expression considering, and then he smiles, echoing back, "Rodney?" It sounds slightly different in his throat, the way everything does, but it's close enough. John nods, grinning, and wonders if he's still going to be allowed to call the other man Meredydd.

It turns out, the next morning, that no one else can say 'Rodney' to his satisfaction, either. John stands to one side, trying to cover his amusement with a coughing jag, watching Rodney-was-Meredydd roll his eyes and berate the other scientists for their mispronunciation.

John sees no reason to mention that his own pronunciation of the name has always been a little off, and that apparently Rodney has decided that John's way is the right way, no matter how many people disagree. Still, after a few minutes of arguing it with the other scientists, Rodney throws his hands up and huffs, "Whatever, you morons," and the venom mixed with the lilt of his voice makes John smile all over again.

He kind of likes being the only one that's managed to say either of the merman's names properly.

Three weeks after Rodney pulls John out of the ocean, John gets called to Elizabeth's office. Rodney walks him part of the way, cutting off to go down to the labs at the transporters, pausing halfway through the door and asking with a tilt of his head, "Lunch?"

John bobs his head automatically, confirming, "Thirteen hundred," as he turns, walking with a slight bounce in his steps. The labs eat up most of Rodney's time, at this point, and John finds himself looking forward to the evenings and the meals they eat together more and more.

He understands the other scientists' fascination with Rodney. He's quite fascinated with the merman himself, and the magic Rodney can work on the Ancient systems doesn't even make sense to him. Rodney tends to do whatever he wants in the labs, pretending that he can't understand any of the others when they try to argue with him or tell him he can't do something.

Usually the pretense doesn't last very long, because Rodney can't seem to stop himself from pointing out the stupid things that everyone around him does. It might be in Ancient, or the whistles and clicks of his language, more and more of it is in English, but the tone says everything that needs to be said. And it amuses John to no end.

He's still smiling by the time he gets to Elizabeth's office, knocking on the door and waiting for her to wave him in. Her desk is covered in loose papers, and though it's early in the morning she already looks stressed, tense and tired. John smoothes his smile out when he sits down.

For a moment she just blinks at him, a little frown of concentration forming in her brow when she asks, "Where's Rodney?"

John raises his eyebrows, slouching down in his chair before speaking, "Down in the labs. Was I supposed to bring him?" Elizabeth hadn't said anything about bringing the merman along, and John hadn't thought anything about it.

She waves a hand, shaking her head and half-smiling when she says, "No, that's fine. I think I've just gotten used to seeing the two of you together." John struggles not to fidget, wondering what exactly she means by that, but before he can ask she's continuing, taking a deep breath, "I think that it's time we started going through the 'gate. We've got things here as under control as they're going to get. Have you picked a fourth member for your team yet?"

John had been expecting this, waiting for it, and he takes a deep breath, slouching a little bit further down in the chair. It hadn't taken very much convincing to get Teyla on his team, and Ford had been a logical choice, but he's not sure if his third choice will go over as well.

He takes a bracing breath, and goes for it, "Meredydd. I mean, Rodney."

Elizabeth's eyebrows shoot up, though she doesn't look as surprised as she might have. She folds her hands on the desk in front of her, tilting her head to the side when she asks, "Are you sure that's completely wise?"

John's had this planned for a while, since she agreed to let Rodney stay in the city. He crosses his ankles and shrugs, "I think so. How many people do we have in the city besides you and him that speak Ancient? And you know how he is with the tech." John pauses, mouth turning down while he considers if he should go here, "And how many of the science staff have we already lost? You've seen the spines. He's not going to be helpless when we get out there."

The look on Elizabeth's face is tight and strained, her hands held tense. After a moment she looks down at the desk, her shoulders rising tight and tense before dropping again when she looks up. She stares at him hard, voice serious when she asks, "And you're not worried about the language barrier?"

John shrugs, "Me and him seem to understand each other just fine."

Elizabeth's expression lightens for a moment, the lines around her eyes crinkling up a little. Her voice is dryly amused when she says, "There is that." For a long stretch they just stare at each other, and then she nods, leaning back in her chair and saying, "Alright, fine, we'll see how he works out. But, John, he's going to have to go through a full examination with Carson before he steps through the 'gate."

John contains the face he wants to make, because Rodney still hisses absently whenever he sees Carson in the mess hall. Still, John's explained about the 'gate to Rodney, about the stars and how they walk among them, and the man had been so gleeful about just the prospect that John can't see him saying no.

He says, "I'll let him know."

The exam doesn't go as badly as it could have. The doctors try to shoo John out of the room when he escorts Rodney in, but he just smiles and ignores them. Besides, Rodney won't release his grip on John's shirt, looking nervous and jumpy.

Carson is trying to be comforting, and John knows that the other man feels badly about his initial response to Rodney. The doctor keeps his voice low and soft, gentle, but Rodney still stares at him suspiciously the entire time, sitting on the exam bed and fidgeting.

Every now and then his spines raise, and John has to touch him to get him to relax, Rodney shooting him a grateful look every time he does.

Carson fills a half-dozen vials with Rodney's blood, before giving him more shots than John can keep track of in his upper arm, until the skin there is red and aggravated. The full bodied scan they do of Rodney garners a flurry of fascinated whispers, and the only time John intervenes in the entire process is when Carson runs a fingertip across the edge of one of Rodney's gills, and Rodney shudders.

John doesn't remember grabbing the doctor's arm, but he has, fingers squeezing closed tight around Carson's wrist while Carson blinks up at him in surprise. John frowns, releasing his grip and shrugging at Carson's puzzled expression. Rodney looks over his shoulder and smiles at John.

And then the exam is done, and John takes Rodney to lunch, listening to Rodney bitch about invasive procedures and staring at the band-aid over the inside of Rodney's elbow. He keeps getting distracted by the memory of Carson's fingers on Rodney's back, not sure why even the

thought if it irritates him. There's something fragile about the gills. John doesn't like the thought of anyone getting near them.

John does his best to put the entire thing out of his mind, and mostly succeeds until Rodney bursts into his room that night, holding a glowing piece of Ancient tech and babbling excitedly. John sits up in bed, watching the sweet, boyish glee on Rodney's face and asking, "When did that happen?"

Rodney shrugs, waving a hand as though to bat the question aside, crawling up onto the bed beside John and keeping up his excited chatter until John feels swept up in his contagious happiness.

It takes Carson a few days to review all the data, and come up with a theory he's willing to share with the class about what exactly Rodney is. John appears to be the only one that doesn't care at all. Rodney is Rodney. John can't say he's particularly concerned with his pedigree.

Still, everyone else seems to want to know, so John sits in on the meeting, twiddling his thumbs and keeping an eye on Rodney. Most of the explanation John doesn't make an effort to pay attention to, not that he really thinks he'd understand the medical jargon if he was trying.

Carson talks a lot about DNA manipulation, and seems frustrated by the fact that he can't properly classify what Rodney is. There are definite mammalian traits, intermingled with fish and amphibian. John finally sighs, flicking a pen against his thigh over and over again when he says, "We're in another galaxy, do we have any reason to think that there's not something new here?"

Carson stares at him for a moment before shrugging, mouth crooking up in a smile, "There is that."

And then Rodney looks up, frowning at the slideshow that Carson had brought along, pointing at the giant salamander on the screen and insisting, "That's not me," which gets Carson going on some long explanation of evolution which John isn't sure he buys for this case, when five minutes ago Carson was as well as saying that someone had been playing fast and loose with the genetic coding of Rodney's people.

Elizabeth advises that she's been looking into the Ancient database to try to find some mention of Rodney's people, but is thus far coming up empty handed, and after that the meeting sort of breaks up. John gets the feeling that it wasn't the major breakthrough they were all hoping for.

They're all heading for the door when Carson blurts, "Oh! And I've identified the poison in his spines. We should have an antidote within a few days."

John raises his eyebrows, looking at Rodney when he says, "Poison?" Rodney shrugs.

Their first mission goes well, easy in and out with a culture that Teyla has known since she was a little girl. Teyla and Ford haven't spent very much time around Rodney yet, and while Teyla just shrugs and doesn't seem at all concerned with the other man's physical differences, John catches Ford staring out of the corner of his eye.

Ford doesn't seem disgusted, or bothered. Just fascinated. Sometimes John catches him reaching out, eyes fixed on the line of blue down the back of Rodney's neck, fingers twitching. He always pulls back, and everyone on the team keeps their hands to themselves.

The natives are more openly fascinated with Rodney, and John is half-sure that's the reason the mission goes over as well as it does. Rodney looks slightly disconcerted when people start touching his hair, but he rallies, allowing the attention and the stares with nothing but a blush and soft whistles.

They return to Atlantis successfully, with a trade agreement for more beans than John can comfortably think about. Rodney is curiously subdued through the de-brief and back to their room, and John is half-sure that he's going to ask not to go on anymore missions, worried by the unnatural silence.

Rodney pulls his shirt off before he speaks, sitting on the edge of the bed and staring at John for a long moment before saying, "They call you Sheppard, why?" He seems confused, bothered by it, and John feels a rush of relief because compared to worrying about Rodney not wanting to be on his team, this is easy.

He shrugs, sitting down beside Rodney, "It's my last name. It's more—" he waves a hand, trying to think how to explain it and settling on, "It's for work."

Rodney hums, still watching John, blue eyes wide and curious when he asks, "I should call you Sheppard?"

John says, "No," without thinking about it, and then clears his throat awkwardly. He doesn't know how to explain that he likes the way Rodney says his name, that he doesn't want it to change. Instead he picks at a piece of fuzz on the blanket, "It's different, with me and you."

The humming sound Rodney makes is pleased and sweet, and when John looks at him, Rodney is smiling. It makes John smile back, a swell of warmth and joy through his chest. He flops down onto the bed to give himself some room to breathe.

When Rodney finally stands, heading for the bathroom, John cracks his eyes open to watch the other man go. Rodney pauses in the doorway, looking over his shoulder, color staining his cheeks when he catches John watching him. John opens his mouth to offer some kind of explanation, but Rodney is already saying, "Good night, John," and stepping through the door.

After he's gone, John dims the light, and mumbles up to the ceiling, "Night."

Chapter 2.

Things fall into place surprisingly well, all in all. Their missions seem to go wrong more often than they go right, but they manage. John and Rodney trade off saving-everyone's-asses duty, Ford has a never ending supply of enthusiasm and explosives, and Teyla puts up with the rest of them with more patience than John knew a person could possess.

Rodney still speaks in either Ancient or his language more often than not when he's talking to himself, but his grasp of English gets better every day. He can hold conversations about something besides science with people other than John after a few months, though when he gets really frustrated he still tends to track John, or, increasingly, Teyla and Ford, down for translating help.

He keeps sleeping in John's tub, even after Elizabeth assigns him quarters of his own. John doesn't mind, used by now to wandering into the bathroom in the morning to make sure that Rodney is safely curled up under the water, his hair floating around his head, his expression still and peaceful.

They've been on Atlantis nearly four months when John ends up beat all to shit by some angry bouncers in what had apparently been a strip club off world. Apparently the no touching the girls rule applied not only to the girls employed at the establishment, and John touching Teyla's elbow had been ill received.

They'd gotten out of it and home, but he'd ended up with a black eye and aching ribs, and a very worried Rodney. John knows that the other man doesn't react especially well to John getting himself hurt, and he's used to Rodney dragging him to the infirmary, yelling at the doctors, and then dragging John back to their quarters when Carson finishes with him.

John waits until they're safely behind closed doors to try to explain that he's fine, which just gets a doubtful look from Rodney. The man tsks, chiding John in his language of whistles and clicks before segueing into English in the middle of a sentence, "—really okay?"

John sighs, nodding, and trying to key his tone to reassuring when he says, "Really, Rodney, I'm fine." Rodney is still staring at him, expression worried beneath the irritation, one side of his mouth twisted down, the tips of all his spines just barely raised in his aggravation.

The pain pills that Carson had fed him are finally starting to take effect, and John sighs, "Okay, here, I'll show you," and pulls his shirt off. The bruising along his right side is already turning purple, and he hisses when he twists his hip forward, poking at the damaged skin and continuing, "See? Fine. Just some bruising."

For a long moment Rodney doesn't say a word, and John looks up, concerned.

He's surprised by the expression on Rodney's face, curious and open. The other man is staring at John's chest, head tilted to the side, gaze sliding across John's skin in a way that involuntarily makes John's breath hitch. He clears his throat, asking softly, "Rodney?"

Rodney blinks, looking up to John's face for a moment and then down again, sounding distracted when he says, "We're not that different. Our bodies. I wasn't sure."

John frowns, and then feels like an ass. He's been staring at Rodney naked pretty much since they first met, but apparently no one had returned the favor. John shrugs, trying not to feel self-conscious under the weight of Rodney's appraisal, managing to say, "I guess not, do you—"

John had been planning to offer to turn around so Rodney could see his back, but his words cut off when Rodney reaches out, skimming his fingertips across John's collarbone. The expression Rodney is wearing is the same one he usually reserves for a new piece of Earth or Ancient tech, all focused concentration and curiosity.

Rodney says, voice low and distracted, "You're not breathing." John sucks in a deep breath, surprised by the way he'd frozen up. Rodney slides his fingers out to John's shoulder, grabbing John's arm and lifting, mouth twitching up in the corner when he whistles with amusement before looking up at John to ask, "Are you all so hairy?"

All John can manage in answer is a shake of his head, his voice caught somewhere in his throat. Rodney just nods, dropping his gaze to John's chest again, raising his other hand and brushing the back of his knuckles up over John's uninjured left side. John has time to think, disjointedly, that this is what comes of allowing Rodney to push him around all the time, and then Rodney is tilting his head to the side and sliding his fingers into John's chest hair, and John stops caring.

The touches are so soft and innocent, and it's killing John. The intensity of Rodney's gaze, the closeness of his body, the brush of Rodney's thumb against the bottom of John's nipple. John swallows heavily, breathing fast and shallow, feeling his muscles tensing up with the strain of not reaching out for Rodney in return. He's not sure he's going to manage.

And then Rodney is moving, stepping around John, his fingertips dragging across John's shoulders. Rodney makes a surprised sound, sliding both hands down John's back, fanning his fingers out across John's shoulders. The membrane between his fingers is cool and smooth, stretched across John's too-hot skin. Rodney says, after a moment, "I keep forgetting that you don't have them. What's it like to only be able to breathe through your nose and mouth?"

John shrugs, Rodney's hands moving over his skin as he does. His voice is low and rough, even after he clears his throat, "It's just the way it is, I don't know what I'm missing."

Rodney hums, rubbing little circles with his thumbs when he says, "You're hairy here too," slightly accusingly, like John has hair in unexpected places just to spite him. John can only shrug again, not trusting himself to speak anymore.

After a moment Rodney steps back, and John bites the insides of his cheeks against the soft sound of want he can feel building in the back of his throat. Rodney steps back around, meeting John's gaze easily now, tone frustrated when he says, "You're not that weird. I don't see why the doctors have to run so many tests when we're so similar."

John manages to shake his head, hoping that's the right response, wishing Rodney wasn't going into the bathroom because he could really use a cold shower right about now.

Rodney cocks his head to the side, and then frowns, "You should be resting," and Rodney manhandling John into bed is really not what John needs right at the moment, but that's what he gets anyway. John manages to make it through while keeping his hands to himself.

He doesn't manage to fall asleep for a long time.

Everything, aside from the usual problems associated with being an expedition on the ass-end of a galaxy where everyone hates you and the slight issue John is having with wanting to jump his teammate, is going pretty well. John doesn't like it, because if there's one thing he doesn't trust, it's when the world seems to be going well.

What he's expecting is an attack by the Wraith, or some more unhappy natives, possibly even an accident with the city, which has killed as many people as the Wraith and angry natives put together. What he gets is Rodney looking confused at the lunch table, his skin flushing red from his hairline down his neck as he tries desperately to yank his shirt off.

By the time John gets around the table to him, Rodney is on the floor, shaking, his shirt rucked up around his shoulders. John can hear himself yelling, for Carson, for help, for Rodney to talk to him. The first two get replies, but all Rodney does is look at him, eyes wide and terrified, holding onto John's arms so hard it hurts.

John says, "It's okay, it's okay, Carson is on his way," which doesn't seem comforting at all, not with Rodney's body jerking, his eyes rolling up in his head. John pulls the other man closer, shouting for the medics, feeling a sick chill in his stomach when he looks down at Rodney's back because his gills are pale pink, instead of the rich red they're supposed to be.

By the time Carson and a handful of other doctors arrive, John is attempting CPR, not knowing what else to do, Rodney gone limp and still in his arms. It's the first time he's seen Rodney lying on his back, it's the first time he's seen the other man so still, and John might be losing his mind just a little bit.

It takes two Marines to pull John off, and he sags down heavily to the floor, his arm over his mouth, breathing hard as they rush Rodney out of the room.

When they get Rodney breathing again, he's already been dead for long minutes. John listens to Carson's report, feeling numb and cold, staring blankly down at the floor. Carson says it was most likely a reaction to a food allergy, and that he hesitates to call it an anaphylactic reaction because of Rodney's different body chemistry. John tunes him out.

John still isn't hearing anything when they allow him in to see Rodney. The man is flat on his stomach, blankets tucked snug around his hips, his scrubs parted to expose his back. His gills are deep red again, his expression still so very blank.

John sits down heavily in the chair beside Rodney's bed, staring. After a long moment he reaches out, taking Rodney's hand, pressing his fingers against the other man's wrist until he can feel the beat of Rodney's pulse. He stays there, counting beats, and ignoring even the thought that Rodney might not wake up, that they have no idea how much, if any, damage the lack of oxygen did to his brain.

Rodney sleeps, John has to think of it as sleep, for three days. And then he wakes up, stirring while John sits staring at him, fingers pressed against Rodney's skin, tracking his pulse. John yells for the doctors, already on his feet, running his hand back over Rodney's head, hair soft and messy from three days of sleep.

Rodney mumbles, "John?" his voice low and raspy, like it hurts.

John laughs, relief bubbling up in his chest, thick and inescapable, interfering with his speech when he says, "Yeah, yeah, buddy, I'm right here. You scared the crap out of me." And when Rodney makes a face, staring at John with disbelief written all over his expression, "Not—okay, that was a bad choice of words."

Rodney rasps, "It was an utterly disgusting choice of words." And that's when Carson comes storming in, expression crumbling with relief when he sees Rodney moving around. John allows himself be pushed to the side, his heart beating way too fast, and he goes to find Teyla and Ford to tell them the good news.

They keep Rodney in the infirmary one more night, and then release him. John is there to gather him up, Rodney watching him with an amused expression while John follows him around. John can't seem to help it, stomach tense and knotted with worry even knowing that the other man is fine now.

Rodney tries to go to work in the labs, but gets frustrated with everyone just watching him after a few hours. He's obviously tired, and John doesn't have to work very hard to convince him to go back to their quarters to get some rest.

Rodney pulls off his shirt the second they're through the door, and John reaches out without thinking, grabbing his shoulder and turning him. Rodney's gills are red, healthy and normal, and John feels himself sigh a little with relief. Rodney sounds puzzled when he asks, "What? What is it?"

John just shakes his head, making himself release his grip and stuffing his hands in his pockets. He says, "Nothing. I just—" Rodney turns around, and John swallows heavily, not knowing how to explain the tangle of emotions in his chest. He shakes himself after a moment, "I know they didn't let you sleep under the water in the infirmary, so..."

Rodney tilts his head to the side, watching John with that dizzying intensity he has, "I don't have to sleep underwater, you know." And there's something about his tone that sends a chill down John's spine, though he doesn't know what it is.

For a long moment they just stare at each other, and then Rodney flashes one of his crooked smiles, "But I am going to now. I feel stiff." And that's all he says before turning away, heading for John's bathroom. After a moment John hears the water start, still standing in the doorway where Rodney had left him.

John fidgets around his room for a few minutes, straightening things that don't need straightened and finally stopping, putting his hands on his hips and exhaling heavily.

When he goes into the bathroom, Rodney is already asleep. John stands over the tub for a long moment, before lowering himself down to the hard floor, bracing his arms on the side of the tub and resting his chin on his folded wrists.

Outside the window, the sun sets, John's body aching and protesting the cold floor and the twist of his spine. He ignores it, watching Rodney sleep until his own eyes get heavy, his head tilting until his cheek is resting on his arm.

John dreams that he's drowning, sinking deeper and deeper beneath the churning waves. He jerks awake to a soft wet touch against his cheek, eyes snapping open to find Rodney staring at him, expression puzzled. Rodney whistles, low and soft, and John shrugs, "I was just resting my eyes."

Rodney rolls his eyes, and splashes John in the face.

Team night had been something John insisted on from the beginning. It had been awkward at first, because none of them had very much in common, not even he and Ford with the generational gap between them. But they'd managed an exchange of cultures, or, at least, the fun parts of their cultures.

There's a pile of movies and video games for them still to get through. And Teyla has more stories to tell than any other person John has ever met. Rodney is more private about his people, though he's happy enough to participate in what the others bring, mostly by mocking, which ranges from good tempered to legitimately disgusted the one time John tries to make him sit through *Back to the Future*.

Now, Rodney is sprawled out across the couch, head resting on John's thigh, complaining about the botany lab as Ford picks out a movie. John is absently rubbing his thumb across Rodney's shoulder, the other man's shirt discarded as soon as he entered the room, because around the team Rodney doesn't see any reason to bother with the restrictive fabric.

When Ford finally straightens, DVD triumphantly in hand, John feels himself frowning. It's not that he doesn't trust Ford's judgment. It's just that sometimes Ford picks movies that make John want to stab himself in the eye, and confuse John as to how the man made it through boot camp without anyone finding out about his love of romantic comedies and kicking the shit out of him.

Ford looks up, grinning, when he slides the DVD in, bouncing over to the couch and sprawling out against John's legs. Teyla, sitting on John's other side, nudges Ford in the head with her toe and Ford bats at her, still grinning when he says, "You guys are going to love this, especially you, Rodney."

Which, of course, makes Rodney perk up, humming a question in his chest as the credits finally start to play. It takes John a moment, frowning at the film, to realize what it is. And then he kicks Ford in the back, the man rolling onto his side, shoulders hitching in suppressed laughter.

Rodney asks, tilting his head up to blink at John, "Why am I going to like this movie? Is it all about people falling over boat railings?"

And John says, automatically, "I didn't fall over the railing," ignoring the way his entire team just snorts and grins. He gets no respect. After a moment Rodney pokes him in the side expectantly and John sighs, "Ford is just being a—"

And that's about when Darryl Hannah first swims onto the screen, and Rodney jerks right up into a sitting position, eyes huge. When Rodney turns to look at John, his expression is puzzled, matching his tone of voice when he speaks, "I thought there wasn't anyone like me on your world?"

John shakes his head, kicking Ford again for good measure, "There's not. Believe me, there's not. It's just someone pretending." For a moment Rodney frowns, and then he sighs, settling back down with a brief flash of sadness across his features.

For most of the movie Rodney is quieter than he usually is, which is just as well, because John doesn't know what to say about Ford's choice, expect that the man might want to start minding his own business. Every time John looks at the younger man he's shaking with barely contained mirth.

Rodney's been on Atlantis five months the morning he pauses while he and John are walking down the hall towards the mess. John frowns, watching Rodney head jerk around, just catching the wide smile breaking across Rodney's face before Rodney is running back to the balcony they just passed.

By the time John gets there, a step behind him, Rodney already has his shirt off. John grabs his arm, saying, "Woah, wait a second! What's going on?"

Rodney turns to look at him, still grinning, almost vibrating in his skin when he whistles and chirps excitedly, before taking a deep breath and managing in English, "My people, look!" And Rodney points out across the waves, to a person John can just see bobbing out in the water, waving their arms at Rodney.

John feels himself frown, and then smoothes the expression out, realizing that he's probably squeezing Rodney's arm a little bit too hard. Of course his people were going to come see him sooner or later. John takes a deep breath, pushing down the sharp flare of possessive jealousy.

Rodney is still grinning, apparently unaware of John's sudden inner turmoil, grabbing the railing and pulling himself up onto it. John feels his heart leap into his throat, and Rodney says, distracted, "Can you get her a shirt? And pants? I'll bring her to the west dock."

And before John can answer him, Rodney is jumping down into the water below, slicing into the water smooth as a knife into butter, barely even making a splash. John grips the railing, staring at the drop, only just hearing the sharp, joyful sound that the woman floating out in the waves makes before she ducks under the water.

John's stomach feels tight, ill, and he waits for a long moment to make sure that Rodney doesn't pop up anywhere. When there's no sign of the other man, John makes himself turn, snatching up clothes for the woman that he already wants to have never heard about as he makes his way down to the dock.

By the time John gets there, Rodney is stepping out of the ocean, salt water dripping off of him, turning to give the woman behind him a hand up. Her hair is dark with the water, but John thinks she might be blond. She has sharp blue eyes, a wide smile, and, well, it only takes John one look to figure out why Rodney said she'd need a shirt.

There's a whistled, clicked, conversation, and then Rodney says, sounding amused, "She wants to know if you ever saw a pair of breasts before," and airily, a half second later, "I told her that you were a virgin. Where are the clothes?" John holds them out mutely, making himself shift his gaze from the blond woman's very nice rack to Rodney.

There's another conversation, John assumes about the clothes, the woman raising her eyebrows and looking skeptical before rolling her eyes and pulling them on. The thin cotton doesn't disguise much when soaking wet. John forces himself to look at her feet, toes webbed the same as Rodney's, because he's a lot of things, but not enough of an asshole to ogle a guy's girlfriend or wife or whatever right in front of him.

Rodney is whistling again, and John catches his own name in the middle of it. He looks up, nodding tightly at the woman when she grins at him. And then Rodney is saying, "John, this is my sister, Jenanine."

John looks back and forth between the two of them, and yes, they do have the exact same eyes. He feels himself grin, relief making him feel light headed, bouncing on the balls of his feet when he says, "Your sister. She's your sister. That's great! That she's your sister."

Rodney blinks at him, tilting his head to the side before saying, carefully, "I think so some days." And then his sister says something that makes Rodney's ears stain red, and before John can ask what it was, Rodney is continuing, "I want to show her the city, come on."

John thinks, for a moment, that they might get in trouble for bringing Jenanine into the city. But by now they're all used to Rodney running around, and more than half the expedition is too busy staring at her clinging shirt to say anything one way or the other.

John follows the siblings around until he gets called away for a disciplinary matter. When he leaves, Zelenka is beet red, stammering over what might be intended to be an introduction. Jenanine appears to be taking the gawking in good spirits, amused if she's anything, which John thinks is a relief. It's looking like they really have to work on not sexually harassing their alien neighbors.

When John makes it back to their quarters, Rodney and his sister are already there. John finds their clothes piled by the door, their soft voices coming from the bathroom. John tries to keep quiet so as not to disturb them, leaning in the doorframe of the bathroom and watching them talk in the mirror above the sink.

They're both in the tub, Rodney with his arms over the edge, staring down at the floor, Jenanine in the far corner, constantly lowering and raising her face from the water. Rodney's face is red, a blush staining across his cheeks, and Jenanine looks a mix between concerned and amused, asking her brother something in a soft series of trills.

John watches Rodney shrug, wondering if it counts as eavesdropping if one doesn't understand the language. Rodney waves one hand, whistling low and wistful, trailing off into a series of clicks. Jenanine sighs, tilting her head to the side and splashing the water with her hand.

Rodney buries his face against his arms, mumbling something John can't hear, and John steps away from the door. He can still almost hear them in his bed, soft splashes and words every bit as liquid smooth as the water they're in. He has no idea what any of it means.

John dreams he's drowning, dark water tumbling him over and over.

In the morning Rodney tells John that he has to take his sister back to their people, that his father is dying and he has to be there for the ceremony. And it takes all the self control John has to keep the look of panic off of his face, to try to keep his voice something like level when he says, "Well, make sure you hurry back, we have that mission to MXM-019 next week, okay?"

And for a moment John thinks Rodney might say something back, but then he just smiles, nodding before he walks away.

Rodney's been gone for three days.

After the first, John had given up any pretense of working, and spent most of his time walking from balcony to balcony, constantly scanning the surface of the waves for Rodney. There are a suspicious amount of other people on the balconies as well, soldiers and scientists alike staring out over the waves and making distracted conversation. John's relieved that apparently he's not the only one missing their merman.

The first night Rodney's away, John runs a warm bath and sits in the water until his skin goes wrinkly. He doesn't even like baths, and his neck hurts afterwards from the way he had his head leaning back against the side of the tub. The next night he just sits on the side with his legs in the tub, thinking about how he'd feel guilty for wasting water if they weren't sitting in the middle of an ocean.

Both nights he has dreams about drowning, and wakes himself up thrashing in the sheets, lungs burning from holding his breath.

Now, John is standing on one of the balconies, Zelenka and Kusanagi leaning against the railing and talking about an experiment they're running. John is considering warning them away from the obvious health hazard a second time, and wondering how hard it would be to just move the city next time Rodney needed to visit his people. With as big as the city is, there have to be engines on it somewhere.

John is just thinking about how to bring up the idea to Elizabeth, when a flash of movement out among the waves catches his attention. Rodney is only at the edge of one of the piers, bobbing up and down with the rise and fall of the waves, raising one arm before ducking back under the water again.

John laughs, turning to grin at Zelenka and Kusanagi, who look the same kind of relieved that John feels. Rodney came back. Rodney is back, and for the first time since he left John feels the tension across his shoulders relax.

Zelenka is saying, "Come, we must get the last phase on the wave emitter started," and flashing John a smile when he and Kusanagi start towards the door. John nods back, bracing his hands on the railing and leaning over, trying to spot Rodney down there in the dark water.

Apparently, the other man is too deep to spot. John sighs, pushing himself back, planning to go down to the dock to meet Rodney.

And that's when the railing gives. Again.

John comes up kicking and sputtering for air, thinking that really, experiencing this once was more than enough. There's salt water in his nose and mouth, and he thinks how stupid it would be to drown while Rodney is right here, somewhere.

And then there's touch against John's back, an arm around his chest pulling him back against Rodney, keeping his head easily above water. John makes himself stop thrashing, blinking up at the sky and trying to think of a good explanation for this happening again.

Rodney says, legs kicking, driving them effortlessly towards the dock, "You're an idiot." There's a note of fond exasperation in his voice, and John pats at the other man's arm where it's wrapped tight and secure around his chest.

When John tries to speak, water splashes in his mouth and he has to spit it out before managing, "I'm happy to see you too, Rodney."

Rodney laughs, the movement shaking through John's body, warming him even though the water is so cold he's been shivering since he fell in, "Of course you are. You'd have drowned without me. Twice now." And John means to explain how that isn't what he meant at all, but then Rodney is pulling him up onto the dock, and there's already a crowd there to welcome him back, and John doesn't manage to say a damn thing before Carson is hustling him away, blathering something about hypothermia.

They don't talk about Rodney's father's death. The one time Teyla brings it up Rodney goes silent and stiff, staring down at his food and refusing to say another word the rest of the meal. After that, no one attempts to speak of it.

Rodney is still himself, still sleeps in John's bathtub, still spends most of his day down in the labs, and still looks like each new world they go to through the 'gate is amazing. John stops having to watch him every second of the day, reassured that Rodney is not planning to run off to his people in the dead of the night.

That's about when they meet the Genii.

It's been a long time since Rodney poisoned someone, and that had been an accident. The three Genii that Rodney puts down before the others get the barrel of a gun tucked in against the hinge of John's jaw are completely intentional.

The men die relatively quickly, but there's no way to pretend it was painless, their heels drumming on the floors, eyes rolling back in their heads as they jerk and twitch around. The spines along Rodney's arm, where they'd grabbed him, are shiny and wet with their blood, and he looks furious, glaring at the men holding John.

For a moment John thinks Rodney might just try to take them all, but then the merman takes a deep breath, spines sliding back beneath his skin, dropping his gaze to the floor. And that image, Rodney with his hands clenched into fists, head down, is what stays with John through the rest of the mission.

When they get back to Atlantis, when they manage to outsmart the Genii and haul ass home, Rodney has a bruise purpling up across his cheek bone, and a split lower lip. It makes John furious, angrier than he can remember being for a long time, and he can't help but blame himself, because he should have known something was wrong, should have been able to protect his team, should have been able to do something.

That night in their quarters, he reaches out to brush his thumb across the bruise, wincing when Rodney hisses softly. John says, "I'm sorry," at the exact same moment that Rodney does, and for a moment they just stare at each other, before Rodney snorts and smiles ruefully.

John smiles back, letting his hand drop away from Rodney's skin.

He doesn't sleep.

John waits until they have everyone evacuated from the city, the winds already rising to a fever pitch outside Atlantis' walls, to pull Rodney aside. Rodney blinks up at him, puzzled and distracted, murmuring to himself as he works on the tablet in his hands. John takes a deep breath, and then blurts, "I think you should go to your people."

That gets Rodney's attention, his head tilting to the side as behind them Elizabeth shifts impatiently. John rushes on, "You can tell me what to do here, but you should be, you should be somewhere safe. There's no reason to risk—"

The look Rodney gives him is scornful, and he jerks his arm out of John's grip, "I'm not leaving." And John feels his jaw clench up, because Rodney had told them, when they first spotted the storms, that his people were used to it, that they hid far, far beneath the surface and just waited it out, and John doesn't want to risk anything happening to Rodney.

Not when they can prevent it so easily.

John is just opening his mouth to try again, but Rodney talks over him, expression set and stubborn, "John, you are my people," and John knows he means the Atlanteans, knows he must mean the Atlanteans, but the words still hit him like a punch in the gut.

John is still staring at him, throat tight with emotion, when Rodney steps back and says, "We don't have a lot of time to get to the stations," and all John can do is nod. He barely even feels his feet touching ground all the way to through the city.

But of course, nothing is as easy as that.

John doesn't know what the Genii are doing, his contact limited to short bursts of radio contact that twist his stomach into something cold and hard. They taunt him with their knowledge of Rodney's spines, assuring him that they've come prepared to safely handle the other man, they tell him they shot Elizabeth, and in the background of every transmission John can hear Rodney, babbling in his own language.

John kills them. All of them. There's not even thought to it, because he doesn't need to think about it. They've come into his city, and they've hurt the people that are his family, and the quick deaths he gives them are better than they deserve.

So much better than they deserve. When Kolya falls backwards through the 'gate, John is already moving towards Rodney where he's crouching on the floor, shoulders hunched over, keening low and tight in the back of his throat. Elizabeth is saying, "I can't get him to speak English, or Ancient, John, I don't know how to finish the programming," and John tunes her out.

Rodney is shaking when John touches his shoulders, doesn't look up. John slides a hand around the back of the other man's neck, ignoring the way Rodney's soaked through with rain, bracing his fingers on Rodney's chin and tilting his head up.

Rodney's eyes are huge, his skin pale, and he's talking so fast, whistles and clicks all blending together. John pushes a hand back through Rodney's hair, moving his head to the side until he manages to catch Rodney's gaze, trying to keep his voice calm and level when he says, "Hey, I'm right here. I'm right here now and I need you to fix the city, okay?"

Rodney doesn't stop talking, but he does push to his feet, leaving wet footprints all the way up to the command room, a path of blood following behind him. And John hadn't known he was injured. John looks sharply across at Elizabeth, who says, softly, "They cut his—" she cuts herself off, swallowing heavily and then going on in a tight voice, "—his hand. When he wouldn't speak English."

John curses, low and harsh, taking the steps up to the control room two at a time. Rodney is bent over one of the consoles, rearranging crystals, talking to himself, a low, constant stream of sound, leaving smears of blood all over everything. At first John can't see the wound, but then Rodney reaches for something, and all John can see is the space between his thumb and forefinger where the pale membrane is supposed to be and isn't.

And then Teyla is radioing to let them know they're safe in the Jumper bay, and when the wave breaks over them, the shield is up. Rodney walks backwards until he hits a wall, sliding down, wrapping his uninjured arm over his head, the other lying limp beside him, a puddle of blood forming around it.

John sits beside him, wraps an arm around Rodney's shoulders and shivers. Outside the night is dark and noisy, inside there are bodies that need to be disposed of, but all John can do is lean his cheek against Rodney's head, listening to the constant clicks and whistles from Rodney's throat, rocking both of them slowly back and forth until Carson finally gets his ass up from the Jumper bay.

Carson works quietly, murmuring softly to himself, Rodney tensing up against John. The spines stay in, and John is grateful, because enough of him is pressed up against enough of Rodney, that the amount of poison would probably mean instant death even with the antidote on hand.

John finds himself watching Carson work, staring blankly down at the doctor's glove covered hands as he cleans the ugly cut. The first stitch gets a low, miserable sound from Rodney's throat. John tightens his hold, shushing Rodney, listening to him go on in his own language, fast and agitated.

The stitches keep tearing out. Carson tries a half dozen times before looking up at John, his eyes huge and miserable, the ragged remnants of Rodney's membrane shredded even worse by the needle. Carson's voice is thick when he says, "I can't fix it. I don't know how."

John feels his stomach twist, sick, opening his mouth and then closing it again because he doesn't know what to say, how to ask Rodney what he wants done. Rodney doesn't make him ask, jaw snapping shut audibly before he says, voice flat and toneless, "Cut it off."

Carson goes even paler, if that's possible, gaping down at the shredded membrane. He sounds like he's speaking from the pit of his stomach, "Rodney—"

"Cut it off! I have more!" Rodney continues, but not in English, voice angry and scared and John pulls Rodney's face against his neck, because Rodney shouldn't have to watch this. Carson still looks sick, reaching into his bag, and John finds that he can't look away, watching Carson cut the membrane away, blood slicking up everything, feeling Rodney's breath hitch and shudder against his skin.

By the time Carson is done, Rodney's entire hand bandaged, Rodney has fallen silent. He's too tense to be unconscious, curling his hand up against his chest when Carson releases it. The doctor looks miserable, swallowing hard before rasping, "And you, Major? Are you well?"

John stares at him, because the question just doesn't seem to make any kind of sense at all. Then he shakes his head, mumbling, "I'm not hurt," before turning his face down, speaking softly against Rodney's hair, "C'mon, we can't sit here, lets go back to the room and get you cleaned up, okay?"

Rodney whistles, low and mournful, but pushes clumsily to his feet anyway. John stares at him the entire way back to their quarters, not sure what he's supposed to say, not sure what he's supposed to do to make this better, wishing Rodney had gone to his people, even if it would have meant the rest of them died.

Rodney pulls his shirt off as soon as he's through the door, and there's a slick of blood across his right shoulder that has John frowning and reaching out without thought. His fingers have only just brushed against skin when Rodney says, voice still flat, like he can't bring emotion to the English, "They had gloves. Thick gloves. My spines snapped."

John winces, finding matching bloody spots around both of Rodney's biceps, wishing he had killed the bastards that did this slower. His voice is a surprise, a low rasp that drags like broken glass up his throat, "God, I'm so sorry."

Rodney shrugs, sitting on the side of John's bed, completely ignoring his soaking wet pants. He's staring down at his bandaged hand, and John kneels in front of him, absently stroking his fingers across the thick bandages.

When Rodney speaks, he sounds distant, "They were mad at Elizabeth, but they," he whistles, waving his uninjured hand, looking for the English word, "they hated me. They said I was a monster. I don't feel like a monster, John."

John feels all the anger in his chest try to make a comeback, but he has nothing useful to do with it, so he shoves it back down. When John looks up, Rodney is staring at his bandaged hand, expression curiously, frighteningly, blank.

John says, "You weren't the monster, believe me."

For a moment Rodney is silent and still, and then he shrugs, "I look like one, though, don't I? To your people? These?" he spreads the fingers of his good hand, spines rising briefly across his fingers, "They're not normal. I should have had Carson cut them all off."

John doesn't remember grabbing Rodney's wrists, but he has, squeezing hard enough that Rodney looks at him, expression still so empty. John grinds out, "Don't you ever say that." And that gets Rodney to blink, gets some emotion finally into his expression, confusion and puzzlement. John swallows hard, "Just don't say that. I like them. They're part of you." John makes himself let go.

Rodney just stares at him, and then sighs tiredly, looking back down at his bandaged hand and waving it around with an aggravated snort, "It's not even waterproof, that's great," before he's tugging on the bandages, frowning.

John catches his hands again, forcing them to still. Rodney sounds impatient, which is the best thing John has heard all night, "John, I want to go to sleep."

"So sleep here," John hadn't meant to say it, but it's already out there. Rodney blinks at him, and John tries to think of anything to say to lessen the impact or change it, but his mind is blank. All he can do is wait, torn between praying Rodney agrees and praying he declines.

And then one side of Rodney's mouth curls up and he says, "Okay."

John nods, standing jerkily and wondering what he just got himself into. Rodney follows his example, but only to step out of his sopping wet pants, before sliding under the blankets. John swallows heavily, then turns, feeling his heart pounding way too hard when he moves to his dresser and grabs dry underwear.

Rodney doesn't wear them, and John can think of no nice way to suggest he start now. Instead, he strips his wet clothes off quickly, pulling on the dry underwear and a new shirt, before cautiously making his way back over to the bed.

Rodney isn't staring at him lustfully, or anything. He's just lying on his stomach, already looking half asleep, and John feels himself exhale shakily with relief. He slides beneath the covers, wondering if he should say goodnight or mention that this probably shouldn't become a habit, or apologize in advance in case he accidentally starts humping Rodney in the middle of the night or something.

Before John can say a word, Rodney is shifting over, settling his head on John's shoulder, curling up against his side. Rodney's skin is cool, almost cold, and John rubs a hand up his side automatically. Rodney makes a soft, short sound, squirming for a moment before settling with a sighed, "Good night."

John stares at the ceiling a long time before managing, "Yeah." He expects not to be able to sleep, not with Rodney pressed all up against him, but the exhaustion of the day pulls him down to dreams quickly.

John wakes up slowly, drifting in the border lands between dreams and waking for a long time before finally managing to get his eyes open. His body is still sore and achy from the previous day, all the promises he had made to his body demanding payment.

And all along his side, Rodney is still sprawled against him. The other man hasn't moved very much in the night, body solid and comforting, uninjured hand resting on John's chest.

John intends to wake Rodney, to stretch, to go get cleaned up, and to go see how much damage was really done the previous day. Instead, he finds himself smiling, looking down at the contrast of Rodney's mother-of-pearl webbing against the black cotton of his shirt.

There's no thought to raising his hand, tracing absent fingers across the undamaged membrane. It's very smooth under his touch, and Rodney hums happily, shivering where he's pressed up against John, shifting around. John blinks, just sleepy enough to think that it might be a good idea to touch again.

The webbing is cool, Rodney's body temperature lower than his. John strokes up the back of Rodney's hand, the man mumbling in his sleep, body rubbing up against John's. And John knows this is where he's supposed to roll out of bed and go on with his day. Instead he slides his fingertips up Rodney's arm, skin smooth and hairless, tracing absent patterns before making his way back to Rodney's hand.

There's no way for them to hold hands, and John frowns absently, wondering if Rodney's people have an equivalent way of showing affection. He traces down the line of Rodney's middle finger, before threading their fingers together as best he can, fascinated by the way it looks.

Rodney's voice is thick, sleepy, and startles John badly, "Your heart is beating very fast." Rodney says it like a question, like he's looking for an explanation, shifting up just enough to blink at John. John feels a brief flash of guilt for waking Rodney, opening his mouth, closing it, wondering if he should take his hand off Rodney's and then forgetting to.

Rodney frowns a little, tilting his head to the side and sliding his hand across John's chest, "Are you okay?"

John manages a nod, reaching up without thinking to brush his thumb over Rodney's cheek. His voice sounds tight, not quite like his own, when he says, "Yeah, I'm just..." He doesn't know what he is, to know how to finish it. He follows the line of Rodney's cheek, finds himself sliding his thumb below Rodney's bottom lip.

Rodney's hand twists up in John's shirt, and John finds himself stretching up off the mattress, finds his thumb tucked behind Rodney's ear, finds himself staring into Rodney's eyes, not sure what he thinks he's doing. He breathes, "Rodney," surprised by the naked want in his tone.

For a moment Rodney stares at him, eyes huge and surprised and so happy that it makes John lick his lips. And then Rodney hums, burbling something that sounds smug and pleased, pulling on John's shirt and closing the negligible distance between their mouths.

The kiss is sweet and hungry at the same time, and John can't help but groaning into it, because he's wanted this so long. Maybe since Rodney grabbed him in the water that first time, breathing for him and pulling him to safety.

When John sinks back down to the mattress, Rodney comes with him, licking his way into John's mouth, making tiny, pleased sounds in the back of his throat. John holds him, fingers curling around the back of Rodney's head, cradling.

John's other hand slides down, and God, Rodney is naked, he had forgotten that somehow. John groans again, fingers dancing across skin, gripping at Rodney's thigh and tugging because he just wants, wants things he doesn't even have the words to articulate.

Luckily, he and Rodney have never particularly needed words to communicate. Rodney whispers something that sounds filthy into John's mouth, tugging and yanking the blanket to the side, shifting and throwing a leg over John's hips.

All John can do is jerk up against the perfection of the other man over him, skirting his hand back up Rodney's side. His fingertips brush along the bottom edge of one of Rodney's gills, and John isn't prepared for the way it makes Rodney gasp against his mouth, shivering and shaking.

John pushes up onto one elbow, Rodney sprawled out over him, trying to look over Rodney's shoulder, trying to see when he repeats the movement. Rodney babbles something musical against the skin of John's throat, hips jerking forward, grinding against John's stomach. And Rodney is hard, erection separated from John's skin only by John's highly interfering shirt.

John manages to force out, "That's good? That's feels good?" wanting so badly to be naked, wanting more to keep touching Rodney. He lets himself drop to the mattress again, because he needs to get both hands on skin, to trace up the line of Rodney's spine and hear the sounds it coaxes from Rodney's throat, to feel him shake and groan and thrust his hips like he can't control it.

Rodney murmurs, in between the whistles and clicks of his own language, "So good," licking and nipping at the line of John's throat. And then Rodney is pushing up, John's hands sliding down his back, landing on his ass and John can't help but squeeze, watching the way Rodney's eyes flutter shut, the way he tilts his head back, baring his throat.

John groans, pushing himself up, ignoring the ache in his shoulders and back. He gets his mouth on the skin of Rodney's neck, his hands squeezing Rodney's ass again because he's only human and God but the sounds Rodney makes are killing him.

And then Rodney is tugging at John's shirt with his uninjured hand, blurting, "Naked, I want you to be naked," voice rough and thick and sounding like sex itself.

"I can do that," John can totally do that. He makes himself stop touching Rodney, just long enough to rip his shirt over his head, and what had he been thinking to wear it last night? John is just opening his mouth to tell Rodney to shift up so he can get rid of the underwear, but Rodney just braces a hand on John's chest and pushes him back down to the bed.

John's mouth is still open, but all that comes out is a long groan, because Rodney is all over him, hands going everywhere, dropping kisses across John's skin. John rocks up against him, cursing desperately up to the ceiling, losing it a little when Rodney flattens a hand on John's stomach, and licks over one of John's nipples.

There's no way John can keep his hands to himself. He grips at Rodney's shoulders, finding his way by touch back to the edges of Rodney's gills, stroking until Rodney starts panting, face pressed up against the middle of John's chest, making these little mewling sounds that John has never heard before. John wonders if he can get the other man off just from that, the idea sending a sharp thrill of pleasure through his gut.

And then Rodney is gathering himself, wriggling up John's body to kiss him, hard and desperate and needy. John groans, hands sliding down, gripping Rodney's hips and trying to pull the other man impossible closer. They rock against each other, and John can't really stop himself from squeezing in time with each slow grind of their hips, wondering again why his underwear haven't just combusted from the heat between them.

Rodney rocks back just enough to rasp impatiently from his kiss-swollen mouth, "You should be naked." John nods dumbly, grunting in protest when Rodney pushes up onto his hands and knees, the sound changing to appreciation half-way through because Rodney is kneeling over him, cock hard and thick, staring down at him like John is the best thing ever.

John squirms around, gritting out, "Hold on, I have an idea," even as he yanks and pulls at his underwear until they're finally down far enough for him to kick off. He knocks the pillows off the bed, bracing his back against the wall and looking up to find Rodney staring at him, eyes huge and wanting. John reaches for him, rasping, "Come here, come here."

And Rodney does, a knee on either side of John's hips, sitting in his lap like it's the most natural thing ever and John groans, pressing his face against the curve of Rodney's neck and shoulder, shifting his legs just far enough to get everything properly situated.

Rodney grabs his chin, tilting John's face up and kissing him hard. John groans into the kiss, keeping one hand around the back of Rodney's neck, sliding his other down between their bodies because he can't take much more.

Rodney's dick isn't different from a human cock in any way that John can tell. The no body-hair thing is slightly different, but John couldn't care less. He rubs his thumb over the head of

Rodney's dick, the other man gasping against his mouth, his hand on John's shoulder squeezing hard.

There's no way John can stop himself now that he's started, and he maps Rodney's cock with his fingertips, breath coming fast and jerky, trading clinging, hungry kisses with Rodney. Rodney is already rocking into the touch, murmuring John's name, and John manages to gasp out, "I want, can you, I need," and it doesn't matter that he's not making sense, because Rodney knows him better than anyone else in the world ever has.

When Rodney slides his hand down John's chest, John thumps his head back into the wall and groans up to the ceiling. Rodney takes the opportunity to lower his mouth to John's neck, kissing and nipping at the tendons standing tense there, dragging his fingertips down the quivering skin of John's stomach, and then his hand is wrapping around John's dick, careful at first, and John jerks up helplessly into the touch.

Rodney takes longer exploring than John had, because, well, Rodney is the thorough sort. He hums against John's throat when he discovers the tight curls around the base of John's cock, and spends what feels like a thousand years dropping careful, soft touches, until John is sure he's going to go insane.

John groans, "Please," his own hand moving over Rodney's cock, feeling jerky and out of control.

Rodney hitches his hips closer, somehow, licking across John's collarbone and finally, finally, gripping John's cock. And John nearly comes from just that, because the membrane between Rodney's thumb and forefinger is stretched across the head of his cock, smooth and warmed from their contact, like nothing he's ever felt before. He can feel Rodney's pulse through it, beating a rhythm against his dick.

John shouts something he doesn't think is actually a word, his other arm wrapping around Rodney's back, carefully between the gills, gripping and holding him tight as they touch each other. Rodney is whistling, constant and desperate, rocking against him, and John can feel his body tensing up, each stroke better than the last and there's no way he can keep this up much longer.

And then he brushes his thumb across the bottom of one of Rodney's gills, and the man babbles something that John doesn't think is a word in any language, jerking his head up and finding John's mouth with his, kissing John deep and sloppy as he comes.

That's the limit of John's ability to endure, feeling Rodney's hand stutter in its rhythm, the wet warmth spilling over his fingers, the intensity with which Rodney is kissing him. John comes, hips lifting off the bed, holding Rodney as tight as he can.

After a moment John has to reach out and take Rodney's hand off his cock, because the other man had still been rubbing his thumb in an absent circle and John just can't take anymore. Rodney mumbles something, dropping his head to John's shoulder, wiping his hand on John's side and then squirming himself closer.

John thinks that maybe they should talk about this or something, but he can feel the brush of Rodney's eyelashes against his throat, and they're all pressed together, and he still has his arm securely around Rodney's back. John tilts his head down, resting his cheek against the top of Rodney's head.

They don't say anything.

When John falls asleep, he dreams he is drowning. When he wakes up, Rodney is kissing him.

The End

Snippet 1.

The slow slide of touch up the inside of John's thighs makes him jerk. He doesn't make it very far before strong, familiar, hands curls around his hips, and he grouches, "Fuck, Rodney, you scared the hell out of me," without any real heat behind the words or any real purpose, because it's not like Rodney can hear him anyway.

Rodney blinks up at him from beneath the water, grinning and looking entirely too pleased with himself. John rolls his eyes and relaxes back against the side of the hot spring, glad that Rodney's managing to actually enjoy himself off-world for once, and is just letting his eyes slip closed when Rodney slides one hand across John's stomach, grabs the waistband of his underwear, and tugs.

John says, "Hey, what—" and then cuts himself off because A, he just got hit in the face with his own soaking wet underwear and B, Rodney is currently licking John's cock.

John swallows, considers his options, and then spreads his thighs, gazing intently down through the water to watch. There's a part of him, even knowing what Rodney is, even looking at the gills on his back, that's worrying helplessly that Rodney will drown himself.

John slides one hand beneath the surface of the water, petting back over Rodney's head, gasping when Rodney closes his lips around John's cock and sucks. The heat of the water already feel good against him, but Rodney's mouth is a thousand times better, tongue tracing patterns up and down the length of John's dick, and when Rodney swallows around him, taking him deep, John shouts, the ragged sound echoing loudly through the caverns.

There's nothing he can do to restrain it, though, not with Rodney slowly, slowly, slowly backing off of him and then going down again. Not when Rodney just stays there, John's dick down his throat, breathing through his gills and fuck but John can't help but jerking his hips forward, trying to get deeper.

Rodney hums, vibrates John's entire body with it, and that's the last little bit John needed to plunge headfirst into sensory overload. He slumps down into the water, and probably would have had to worry about drowning himself, but Rodney is catching him, pulling him back up, holding him steady.

Snippet 2.

Richard had met Colonel Sheppard and all the members of his team before, of course. There had been the unfortunate incident with the Replicators attempting to gain control of the city, for one, and check-ups on Doctor Weir's oversight as well. So he's more than aware of them and their...special status. But he'd never really thought they were going to be his problem. He'd been wrong.

They're waiting for him in the 'gate room when he arrives. The alien, Rodney, or, well, Richard has spent hours working on the proper pronunciation of the man's name in his native tongue, is shoeless and his hair is wet. No one appears to care.

Colonel Sheppard is standing right at Rodney's shoulder, his arms crossed and his chin tilted down to his chest. Richard never knew the man before the accident, but he's seen pictures. And, obviously, he knows that the man's skin didn't used to be quite so blue. With sunglasses, a turtleneck, and long sleeves, Sheppard could pass for human.

He isn't wearing any of those things right now.

Richard shakes his head, and does his best to stumble through a greeting, wondering how soon he can retreat to his office for just a little breathing room. Rodney whistles something as Richard is walking out of the room, and Richard looks over his shoulder in time to watch Sheppard shrug, pressing himself against Rodney and clicking loudly without opening his mouth.

No one in the control room so much as bats an eye when Sheppard nuzzles against Rodney's neck and stays there, apparently content to just cuddle him right there. Richard had been prepared for that as well, but it's still startling to see the military commander of the expedition snuggling up to his husband and no one responding to it at all.

Richard shakes his head, and walks a little faster to his office. Obviously, this place is going to take some getting used to.

Snippet 3.

The force-field feels odd against John's skin. There's a constant tingle to it, not enough to be painful, but enough that he's constantly aware that it's there, a thin shield of protection from his scalp to the soles of his feet. It's more the absence of all other sensation that he's noticing.

He can't feel the icy cold water that's all around him. He can't feel the pressure of the weight on an entire ocean sitting on top of him. Hell, John can't even feel Rodney's skin, where he's holding on tight to Rodney's wrist.

But that's the price he has to pay to be able to see this. The Ancient shield will keep him alive, and for that he has to give up certain sensations. John can deal with that, but it doesn't mean he won't be glad when they get back to Atlantis and he can turn the damn thing off and feel Rodney again.

For now he just holds onto Rodney, staring out across an abyss such as he's never seen. They're already deep below the surface, down where there's no natural light at all. The shield is allowing John to see, though the world has a strange green-ish tinge that makes John think of brackish water and algae. That all pales to unimportance compared to what John's seeing.

Below them the ocean floor falls away to depths that John can't even fathom. It's a black hole right on their planet, and the sheer impression of size it leaves makes John's breath hitch. He wants to ask Rodney how big it is, if his people have mapped and explored all of it, but that will have to wait until they're back on Atlantis as well. There's no way for them to communicate down here.

Rodney pulls on John's arm then, hard, pulling John back against the gigantic stone they've been sheltering against from the current. John blinks, turning to look, and Rodney pulls on him harder, raising a finger to his lips, as though John could make a sound if he wanted to, and then pointing at something out in the black gloom of the water.

Apparently the Ancient technology isn't as good as Rodney's vision, because for a long moment John can't see a damn thing. And then he catches a flash of movement, something huge and darker than even the surrounding water moving towards them.

John's heart starts beating faster just from the size of the leviathan moving towards them. The beast is moving insanely quickly, and John catches only a momentary look at the entire creature before it's past. His mind can't quite process all that he sees, but he knows that there are smaller

fish clinging to the beast's sides, and the sheer force of the water displaced by the giant almost tumbles John down into the abyss by his feet.

Rodney holds onto him, and John turns to look at him, aware that he must be wide-eyed. Rodney only grins at him, expression brightening with delight as he pulls on John's arm again, motioning towards the abyss expectantly.

There's a part of John that doesn't want to go down there, that imagines bigger monsters. But Rodney is with him, and John wants to see, wants to know what Rodney's life was like before he came to them. And he has faith that Rodney will make sure they both rise again.

John nods, squeezing Rodney's arm, and they descend.

Snippet 4.

The first time Rodney meets Ronon, Rodney happens to be hanging upside down by his ankle. They don't really get to talk much, not that Rodney had been in any mood to speak a language the other man would have understood. Rodney had been pissed off to holy hell, every spine out, hissing and furious. At the time he hadn't thought very much about it.

He continues not thinking very much about it back on Atlantis. People sometimes react badly to realizing that he's not human, but he doesn't have time to worry about the opinion of the strange man that John has apparently adopted. Many of the new arrivals from Earth are much bigger problems, and some of them make Rodney nervous.

He doesn't want to have to hurt any of the people that he lives with on Atlantis, but they don't seem to realize that their threatening behavior is putting them in danger. When they bump into him intentionally in the halls it takes a lot of effort for Rodney to keep his spines in, especially when more and more he is tempted to just not.

So Rodney doesn't particularly worry about Ronon knowing what he is. He barely sees the man, though John apparently wants Ronon to be on their team. Therefore, Rodney's slightly surprised when Ronon sits down across from him in the mess one day, reaches out, and grabs Rodney's wrist.

Rodney hisses automatically, spines raising all around Ronon's hand. It's so hard to keep the ones below Ronon's grip from extending, but he doesn't want to kill anyone, and he knows too well how deadly his poison is to the humans.

Ronon asks, "What are you?" gruff and abrupt, staring at the membrane between Rodney's fingers. He looks more openly curious than upset, and Rodney relaxes just a little. Oddly

enough, he doesn't feel threatened by Ronon. It possibly has something to do with the fact that Ronon isn't squeezing Rodney's wrist, or twisting at Rodney's skin. He's just touching.

Rodney has to search for the right words for just a moment, resisting the urge to answer in his native language. He finally manages, "I'm a scientist," because that's what he is here, and that should be the important thing.

For a long moment Ronon is silent, and then he nods, grunting and releasing Rodney's wrist. Then Ronon is reaching out, taking half of Rodney's sandwich right off of his tray and shoving half of it into his mouth. It reminds Rodney of Ford so sharply that it hurts.

Rodney shakes himself, sliding the rest of the tray over towards Ronon. Maybe John was right to want to include to man on their team.